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ABSTRACT

This publication is the complete transcript of a weekly radio program devoted to contemporary issues in American education. This particular program is the second of two that focus on the topic of school consolidation. In separate segments of the program, Wendy Blair and John Merrow of National Public Radio discuss declining school enrollment and school consolidation; Philadelphia school system administrator Ann Bush and school system employee Bill Jones discuss declining enrollment in Philadelphia; San Francisco superintendent Robert Alioto and teacher spokesman David Klishman discuss declining enrollment in San Francisco; Thomas Shannon of the National School Boards Association discusses the impact of declining enrollment; author Jonathan Sher discusses whether closing small schools saves money; Madan Draya and Jim Banks of Washington, D.C. discuss "recycling" old school buildings; Conrad Smith, Betty Ann Kane, and Jay Weldon Greene from the Washington, D.C. school board and district administration discuss Washington's school building program; Joannie Flat of the Mesa Arizona School District discusses the advantages of a district with increasing enrollment; John Bristol, superintendent of a suburban Minnesota district, discusses the problems associated with increasing enrollment; and Louis Ploch of the University of Maine and Bangor superintendent Wendall Eton discuss the impact of shifting population in Maine. (JG)

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# OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

PROGRAM TRANSCRIPTS OF
A WEEKLY SERIES BROADCAST BY
MEMBER STATIONS OF
NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

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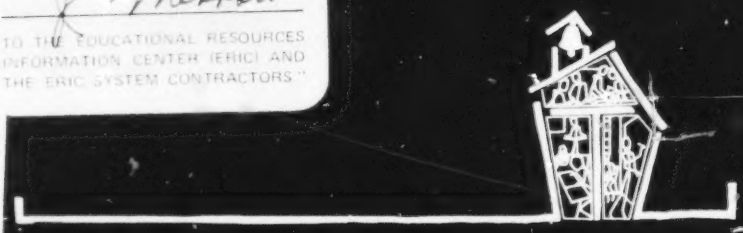

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Program #90 SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION: IS BIGGER BETTER?
Part II

September 5, 1977

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"IS BIGGER BETTER?"

PART II

BLAIR: From National Public Radio in Washington, this is OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

WOMAN: People buy their homes to send their children here, in the neighborhood school, that's why they buy homes out here.

SHER: If that feeling of neighborhood solidarity is eliminated, I think the kids suffer in that kind of setup. And I think that that process of bureaucratizing education is not one which is helpful to children in the least.

MAN: We'll continue to close schools this September, and we're stepping up our program of closing schools. We're being forced to do that by our financial crisis.

WOMAN: It's been traumatic for employees, for parents and for students. We get the large volume of letters expressing concern from all quarters everyday.

WOMAN: I went to Port Laure when I was a kid, for I was born and raised in the neighborhood and I know the whole change of the neighborhood right along, like from everyday I see the difference and change.

WOMAN: I don't think it's a very good idea. Well, some kids, they need the school really. The neighborhood, you know.

* * *

MERROW: What's happening to neighborhood schools around the country? I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair, and this week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, we're taking a closer look at what happens in school districts when there aren't enough children to keep the schools full.

* * *

DECLINING STUDENT ENROLLMENT

PLOCH: Population prediction is probably about the most risky business going, so it's very difficult to say what's going to happen for sure.

ETON: I can remember just a few years ago when I was quite taken with the fact by reading Barry Commoner and Paul Erlich and these people that we were going to just multiply ourselves off the face of the earth, or so it seemed. And that we were going to have quite a baby boom in the late'70's, early'80's. I guess that

just isn't going to take place.

If the enrollment has declined drastically, obviously we're going to close the schools.

SHER: Once again, the zeal of educational administrators to force an issue and to make a point has led them to, in some cases, to pad the figures. And I think they will probably save some money, but not nearly as much as they would like to believe they will.

* * *

MERROW: Those people are talking about a common problem. Educators call it "declining enrollment" and what happens in most school districts is pretty predictable. First, the administrators develop a list of possible schools to be closed. Then, there's a lot of politicking and public outcry, and eventually the school board closes down some neighborhood schools.

BLAIR: Last week, we learned about the school and school district consolidation movement. Since 1930, 99% of American's 150,000 one room schools have been shut down. Today there are only 1,500 left.

MERROW: In that same year, 1930, there were 128,000 school districts. Today, there are only 16,000.

BLAIR: Merging schools and school districts is called consolidation, and it's still going on. The reasons advanced by pro-consolidation forces are economy, efficiency and better education. The opponents, as you might expect, disagree on all three counts.

MERROW: "Bigger is better." That's the American way.

BLAIR: But it's a habit that school districts may have to break.

MERROW: Today's rash of school closings probably shouldn't be called consolidation. Instead, there just aren't enough kids per school, and so a few schools -- usually the smaller, older ones are closed.

BLAIR: It's really not as simple as that, of course. For one thing we're a mobile society, and that means that while enrollment may be declining in many areas, it's actually increasing in other parts of the country: the Southwest for example, or in parts of Maine.

MERROW: And families move within a school district from one school area to another. If enough families do that then suddenly one schools is over-crowded and another is half empty.

SAN FRANCISCO

MERROW: Let's begin with San Francisco, which has lost 40,000 students in the past ten years. In the spring of 1977, the school board voted to shut five schools. Reporter Jay Baltezore describes the San Francisco situation.

BALTEZORE: What happens when a large metropolitan school district loses 40,000 students in ten years? Well, in some case, they may fire some of the teachers. In others, the budget might be cut, or some student programs might be eliminated. In San Francisco the answer this year is to close some schools. In May, the San Francisco Board of Education voted to shut down five district schools. They claimed the student population had dropped nearly 40% in ten years, while the number of schools operating had remained the

same. The decision was met with outrage from the community, in fact, from all segments of the community. Parents claimed their children would be bused all over the city, further undermining the neighborhood feeling. But, Superintendent Robert Alioto says the district had no other choice. The cost of operating poorly attended schools was too high. He claims the school closures were done in an equitable manner.

ALIOTO: We recommended the closing of schools in white, middle-class neighborhoods. We've recommended the closing of schools in Hunter's Point, which is predominantly black. And, we've recommended not to reconstruct in Chinatown, which is obviously predominantly Chinese. I think we've hit every ethnic, racial group in the city in our recommendations, not deliberately, but by our own analysis, and by just conditions as they currently exist. And, we're analyzing the city now based on the changes in our various neighborhoods. I think the parents can expect that we're going to continue to merge and close schools. I think if we do it thoughtfully, and if we have reasonable amounts of success in our initial efforts, that the resistance to that will not be so great.

BALTEZORE: There's a question in some people's minds as to whether closing the schools is the proper thing. San Francisco, like many other cities, is losing a large middle-class population to the suburbs. In the Bay area, the property taxes are lower and some cases the schools are better outside the city. And with Bay Area Rapid Transit -- BART -- a parent can commute to San Francisco from the East Bay and feel the children are safer in suburban schools. Dave Klishman, a spokesman for the San Francisco Federation of Teachers says Superintendent Alioto has done nothing to encourage families to stay in the city.

KLISHMAN: We feel that an effective public relations program outlining the positive aspects of the public schools, and the superior nature of the program, that the declining student enrollment will be lessened if not totally eliminated. It seems to us that the effect of the closing of, for example, Parkside Elementary and part of the junior high, is that many of those children and students, at least on the junior high level, will not continue in the public schools, they will go elsewhere. Families will either move out of town, or they will attend the private schools in the surrounding neighborhood.

BALTEZORE: For the ethnic neighborhoods though, the situation is quite different. Most black, Chinese and Mexican-American students don't have the money to go to private schools. So when the school nearby their home is closed, they'll have to be bused further from where they live. And one of the results of the move to an unfamiliar area is vandalism and violence. Portulla Junior High School in the southeast part of San Francisco has a predominantly black student body, most of them coming from the nearby Hunter's Point-Bayview area. The students don't like the idea that they'll be moved again, now that Portulla will be closed. But some of the residents and merchants say that student vandalism will go elsewhere.

WOMAN: I'm in favor of the closing of the high school because there have been trouble with the kids. They throw away their trash in front of our doorsteps. They, sometimes they harrass the kids going to the small, to the elementary school and to the Catholic schools.

WOMAN: People buy their homes to send their children here, and the neighborhood school, that's why they buy homes out here.

STUDENT: A lot of other students don't want to go to other schools, they would rather stay at their schools.

WOMAN: I don't think it's a very good idea. Well some kids they need

the school really. The neighborhood, you know.

BALTEZORE: The school district plans to lease the closed schools to the University of California and the state and city colleges. Superintendent Alioto says he expects the school population will decrease by another 2,000 to 3,000 for the next two to three years. He says that will result in another three to five schools being closed again next year, and probably the year after. To the school district, it might mean a savings of some money, but for the students to be shifted to another school, it's a new environment and new teachers. For OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, I'm Jay Baltezore in San Francisco.

BLAIR: Meanwhile, back on the east coast, school-age children are in even shorter supply than on the west coast. In the cities the enrollment decline is fastest as families move to the suburbs or stop having children.

MERROW: Philadelphia has severe financial problems in additon to its having lost nearly 30,000 students in the past five years. The next step is closing schools, particularly neighborhood schools. Reporter Deborah Hamilton asked Dr. Ann Bush of the Philadelphia school system what is likely to happen if some schools are closed.

PHILADELPHIA

BUSH: Well, we have no plans immediately to close schools. Now the transition for closing some of our older buildings, in order, you know, over years, will take place gradually, where parents will be involved in meetings in terms of where their children will go, what kind of programs will be available to them. However, in many communities there are older buildings which perhaps can be closed because their, some portions of them or all of them, would be non-fire resistant. But these are schools where the parents of the children enrolled now were students there, and their grandparents were students there. The school has become almost an institution within that community and there is a great deal of trauma associated with closing any of our school buildings.

HAMILTON: When the children are transitioned from one center to another, that one that has closed down, don't they lose their school buddies. Isn't that part of the problem for children?

BUSH: No question about it!

MERROW: Dr. Ann Bush of the Philadelphia school system talking with Deborah Hamilton of member station WUHY, Philadelphia.

BLAIR: Later oninthis program we'll have reports on what those empty school buildings can be used for, but before we leave Philadelphia. . .

JONES: How old is the building? How safe is it? How costly is it to operate? And, what is its enrollment? If the enrollment has declined drastically and we can take the 200, or 300, or 400, or 500 students that are left in that school and put them somewhere else, obviously we're going to close the school. We have closed, I would say, an average of three or four or perhaps five schools a year in Philadelphia for the past several years. In some communities, that would cause a calamity. Obviously in Philadelphia with some 285, or 286 schools, it hasn't made a great big dent. But we have been closing schools all along and we'll continue to close schools this September, and we've got some on the drawingboards for February 78 and some more for September 78. So, we're stepping up our program of closing schools. We're being forced to do that by our financial crisis.

BLAIR: That's Bill Jones, who also works for the Philadelphia school

system, but who uses a different set of numbers when talking about school closings. When he was interviewed for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION by reporter Karen James, Jones indicated that there were at least three lists of schools that might be closed.

JONES: We've had three different projections in the last three months and as we continue to sift through the buildings and our priorities, and our money and various things like that. But right now, the latest list includes some 27 schools, alternative programs and centers run by the school district, which in the absence of additional funds would be closed by September 1978.

JAMES: How many schcols will be closed regardless of the financial situation?

JONES: Well, as I say, we have been closing, three, four, five schools a year, so I would say anywhere from nine, ten, twelve schools in the next two or three years would close anyway. We don't have that much of a problem with closing underutilized schools, because it does make fiscal sense and we can send students to other schools. Where we have the problem is having to close alternative programs which have been very successful in places like skill centers. And we have one additional problem: at one point we have some 36 schools identified for the next two, three years instead of 27, but we've also had to cut, almost cut out, our transportation program -- cut way back on school busing -- for purposes of distance and purposes of hazardous road conditions. So, we're faced with a dilemma of not being able to close underutilized schools cause there are no buses to take the students to other schools which are more than a couple of miles away.

MERROW: Bill Jones, of the Philadelphia school system, talking with reporter Karen James of member station WUHY. It's a "catch-22,", a dilemma with no easy answer, or as Thomas Shannon put it,"A forced choice among bad alternatives."

BLAIR: Shannon is Executive Director of the National School Boards Association, and he's a former Deputy School Superintendent and school board lawyer as well. John asked Shannon what happens in a school district when enrollment drops.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SCHOOL ENROLLMENT DROPS

SHANNON: I think you really have two dimensions to the problem. One is an external dimension, and the other is an internal dimension. Externally, the school district begins to scramble with the state legislature on the state school finance laws to back off this concept of state aid being tied to individual student enrollment. There is also an attempt made to expand the differing kinds of aid that states provide local school districts. Now, internally, another scramble is taking place, and that scramble is related primarily to saving programs that individual administrators who are teachers think are very worthwhile.

MERROW: "Cut somebody else, don't cut me."

SHANNON: That's right. So, you begin to analyze ways in which you can influence the final decision-maker within your general perceptions of what is ethical on a staff of a school district, and you begin to touch the pressure points. The pressure points, of course, are in the superintendent's office and in the school board. The school board makes the final decision, and the school board is a governance body, therefore, it is subjected to the usual governance pressures. In fact some school board members would characterize these pressures as downright harrassment in certain cases. There are always a cadre of parents and other citizens dedicated to the

special kinds of programs, and when those people receive the alert that their programs are in trouble, they're going to do something about it.

MERROW: And is the old rule, "the squeaky wheel that gets the grease." I mean, might I prevail if I can get enough parents making enough noise and doing enough pressuring and so on?

SHANNON: That certainly is the basis on which these special education interest groups will proceed. Now, whether or not the tactic will work, that is to say whether or not they will get the grease because they squeak the loudest. I think is a function of the strength and integrity of the local school board. You have to remember that the programs that being espoused or advocated usually are sound programs. It's not a question of programs that are not good programs. It's a question rather of in the budget cutting process what bad decision will cause the least trouble to the school district.

MERROW: Couldn't school districts save a lot of money and perhaps, therefore, avoid having to close schools by simply getting rid of a whole lot of the middle management, the administrators.

SHANNON: Oh no. I don't think that that's a viable solution at all! As a matter of fact, I believe that most schools, school systems today instead of being overadministered are underadministered. I think this is especially true as we enter a new time of parental involvement. This kind of involvement takes more staff time, but I think that where there is a so-called "top heaviness" in school administration, most of that is the result of union, teacher union management dialogue.

BLAIR: Thomas Shannon, the Executive Director of the National School Boards Association in Washington.

MERROW: Shannon may not be concerned about the number of school administrators, but perhaps he ought to be. Their numbers are increasing, even as the number of students decreases.

BLAIR: Jonathan Sher, the author of Education in Rural America, believes that small schools, particularly those out in the country, have distinct advantages over big schools. Small schools, says Sher, foster close relationships among students and teachers and allow for more individualized instruction. He also thinks that in many cases that it costs more to close a small school than it does to keep it open!

DOES THE CLOSING OF SMALL SCHOOLS REALLY SAVE MONEY?

SHER: Once again, the zeal of education administrators to force an issue and to make a point has led them to, in some cases, pad the figures, or to put it more politely, to be overly optimistic.

MERROW: When I talked with Jonathan Sher recently, I asked him whether he believed the money-saving arguments being put forth by school districts when they closed small schools.

SHER: Yeah, I think that they will probably save some money, but not nearly as much as they would like to believe they will. For example, I've seen in some specific metropolitan cases where they have used figures in a way which is not the most legitimate. For example, saying that in one certain school we'll save $50,000 for these reasons and they carefully document them, and then they say,therefore if we close ten schools, we'll save $500,000. Well, it's been my experience with the economics of schools that it isn't quite that simple and clean,and I think that there is a good bit of overestimating going on in order to force the issue.

MERROW: Now let's say a suburban community closes five small schools and consolidates them into one larger school, a fairly good size school. Do you think the quality of education, the quality of the kids' experience there will suffer?

SHER: I think that the quality will suffer to some extent, if there are larger classes, if the environment is a more impersonal one, if the children are removed from daily contact with other kids in their neighborhood, if that feeling of neighborhood solidarity is eliminated, I think the kids suffer in that kind of setup. The thing that often happens is that personal problems that are dealt with on a personal level in a small school become policy issues and policy problems and logistical problems in a larger school. And I think that that process of bureaucratizing education is not one which is helpful to children in the least.

MERROW: I know you have some other suggestions, but here's the problem: a school district is running a deficit which in many cases is in fact illegal; they've got to save some money. The administrators say let's close these schools and we'll save some money. I know you have some other suggestions, other ways to save money.

SHER: There are other ways of saving money. Most metropolitan school districts, particularly when compared with the rural districts I've spent a good deal of time in. They spend a lot of money on things that in other areas would be considered "frills": air conditioning in buildings, fancy new equipment, fancy new athletic facilities, very high salaries for lots and lots of administrators and lots and lots of specialists that often are required to deal with the bureaucratic problems of large schools. So I think that part of is that money can be saved by eliminating some of the "frills" that already exist without having to close schools. But I think the other kind of alternative which in many ways is more interesting is to use the schools which are suffering from a declining enrollment for other purposes. That is to say that if a school is going to be 25% unoccupied during a given school year, that may, intead of seeing that as a problem, it may be wise to look at that as a real opportunity for the community and for the education of the children in that school. There's a whole range of social service programs in cities for kids, like drug counselling programs. There's no reason why the offices of those kinds of programs and their necessary space requirements can't be met by these unoccupied school buildings.

BLAIR: Jonathan Sher, author of a new book, Education in Rural America.

MERROW: Sher talked about new uses for the unused spaces in schools, or for entire schools that are closed down. While schools in some cities and towns are standing empty and unused, a few school districts have found imaginative and economically productive uses for the buildings.

BLAIR: In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, a neighborhood assocation rents an unused school and uses it for daycare, an afternoon recreation program, adult education classes and even a private school.

MERROW: In Austin, Texas, and Santa Clara, California, empty schools are being used for community college classes. And in Salt Lake City, two empty schools have been sold and turned into office buildings. Reporter John Bisney found a recycled one room school house in Calloway County, Missouri. Dwight Rieman bought it after it had already been converted into a private residence. He uses it as a weekend retreat. Bisney talked to Dwight Rieman about his "one room school house" retreat.

* * *

A ONE ROOM SCHOOL HOUSE RETREAT

RIEMAN: One of the rooms has the original front platform which runs all across the room where the teacher sat with the desk, and the frame for the blackboards is still there, although the blackboards are gone. We have the original sign stating "Red Brush School - District No. 36." One of the other reminders that it is, was, a school are the initials carved on the outside walls. There are many initials. It's been painted over, but they're still quite distinct. Occasionally I find broken pieces of school furniture scattered around the grounds. Also, an occasional inkwell that the kids threw away. The trees are very lovely. There are two huge oak trees beside the school that must be perhaps 300 years old.

BISNEY: When was it last used as a school?

RIEMAN: 1959.

BISNEY: And what happened?

RIEMAN: The district became consolidated and this, along with other one room schools in the are were given up.

BISNEY: Did the kids, or the school district,or anybody lose anything by that consolidation? Do you think that maybe they would have been better off if they'd kept some of these smaller school houses.

RISMAN: Ah yes I have some bias for the one room schools since I went to one as a child and we never had more than 20 students in all eight grades. So, there was a closeness and a nice relationship among students, and also between students and the teacher.

* * *

MERROW: That report for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION from John Bisney, KBIA, Columbia, Missouri.

BLAIR: "Recycling," as it's called is a popular topic. David Selvin prepared this report for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

THE 'RECYCLING' OF OLD SCHOOL BUILDINGS

SELVIN: It's already been done in Gloucester, Massachusetts. It's being considered here in Washington, D.C., and it would seem an ideal solution for those cities and towns that find themselves the reluctant "donors" of a growing number of empty and outdated school houses. It amounts to "recycling" the old buildings: converting them into housing, warehouses or offices. The Gloucester School, for instance, became a home for elderly people, which according to Madan Draya of D.C.'s neighborhood preservation administration, is the best way to use the old schools.

DRAYA: Well it's an interesting coincidence that the average, the size of the average classroom is just about the same size as an average one-bedroom apartment. In other words, a small classroom is about 700 square feet. A large classroom might be 900 square feet, and a larger classroom would lend itself to, possibly, a two or two and a half bedroom apartment. So what this means is that without moving walls or changing the alignment of hallways, simply by bringing in bathroom and kitchen units, you can take what was a classroom and make it into an apartment. And the other thing that's really idea is usually the window arrangement. These classroom buildings have lots of natural light in the old style and consequently you have an apartment that,even with new subdivisions within the classroom, is a very light, spacious, roomy place. It's been the experience of the city that for large buildings where you have

very long corridors as you do in some of these old high schools, they're not really suitable for multi-family use, or families with children because we have the children out in the corridors and the possibility of a lot of vandalism and destruction. Buildings of this design should then really be used for limited occupancy, either by couples; it doesn't have to be exclusively for the elderly, but families with children don't lend themselves well to this type of environment.

SELVIN: That was Madan Draya of D.C.'s Housing Administration. This kind of conversion that should be mentioned is also a lot cheaper than building new housing, by about $10 a square foot. Old school buildings are also generally fire-proofed and better built. Jim Banks, the Vice-President for Community Development of the Washington Board of Realtors has visited the Gloucester Project and talked to the people living there.

BANKS: As a matter of fact, we talked to one lady who had taught in this school for 30 years. As a matter of fact, she'd been a student there, and she taught there for 30 years, and now she's living there. And she just loves it. As a matter of fact, everybody we saw just loved it. And I guess, you know, like everything else, the Gloucester experience is due to very imaginative and very committed group of people and it's extremely well run, so that you can't guarantee that all of those forces are going to be present in any community where this is undertaken. But where those forces are, it can be extremely pleasant living.

SELVIN: We seem to be doing something very different, as a society I guess, we seem to be taking the old and fixing it up rather than tearing it down. That seems to be a change. Is that true?

BANKS: Well, there is certainly more concentration on the preservation of some of it, particularly some of our old buildings, and I think a lot of forces have brought us to this point. One, extremely high costs of building materials and building labor. And many of the buildings that were constructed 50 years ago, 60 years ago, are terribly high quality, very high quality buildings and almost impossible to duplicate at any cost today. And the preservation of those dwellings, or those buildings, is extremely important both from an economic point and from a social point of view, and in many cases, from a cultural point of view. I think we have to preserve some of the buildings of historic note, and I think we have to preserve some of the structures which are economically valuable. I think we have to be careful how we do it. We don't want to go so far one way that we don't permit some kind of economic progress. But on the other hand, if we continue to tear buildings down and build new buildings, most of which are not nearly as attractive as the buildings we're tearing down, then we're going to have a kind of a empty cultured society. I think we need to preserve some of the old as well as build some new.

SELVIN: Although Washington is considering the conversion of its old schools to housing, things don't always work out the way they're supposed to. Recently, one of the city's finest old schools, Dunbar High School,was torn down, demolished to make way for an athletic field for the new Dunbar High School. Once again, Madan Draya and Jim Banks.

DRAYA: Unfortunatley, the planning for the Dunbar site began and was pretty much completed four or five years ago. And a new high school was built with the idea that the location or the site where the old high school would be razed and then that area would be made available for athletic facilities for the school. This planning was done exclusively by the school board without real participation by this department or the city's Planning Agency. And as a result, at a time when possibly more land could have been acquired, although it would have been housing that would probably had to have been demolished to provide

for athletic facilities for the school, it wasn't done. As a consequence, the new building was built. The school needed these facilities, and the only place left was to tear down the old school. I think it was a terrible loss for the city. I regret it and I think that the planning at the time was short-sighted and I don't think we're going to see that happening again.

BANKS: There was more political pressure for the provision of the playing field than there was provision for the retention of that building. The other problem with buildings of historic value is that unless they are usable, or income producing, or somebody offers enough money to preserve them, they can't be preserved. They won't be preserved unless somebody maintains them, and that costs money. So one way or the other, sombody's got to meet that cost.

BLAIR: That report was prepared by David Selvin.

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MERROW: You're listening to National Public Radio's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, and we're talking about declining student enrollment and school closings. It's a common problem occurring all over the country. From another perspective, schools aren't closed because there aren't enough students, but because there are too many schools: that is because the school board and the city built too many classrooms. But planning for the future is not an exact science by any means. How do you figure out how many elementary school-age kids there will be in such and such a neighborhood five years from now. One answer, build a big school that will draw kids from lots of different neighborhoods.

BLAIR: That sounds great on paper, but wait till you have to start closing the small neighborhood schools to fill the big one.

MERROW: Karen Sughrue has a report on the school building and overbuilding in Washington, D.C.

THE WASHINGTON, D.C. SCHOOL BUILDING PROGRAM

SUGHRUE: The building program which began in the late '60's has produced close to 50 new elementary schools. School planners say there were supposed to be enough students for those schools, but in the past ten years, the D.C. school population, especially at the elementary level, has dropped sharply. So far this year, 13 schools all over 50 years old have been closed. The Chairman of the D.C. School Board's Capital Improvements Committee, Conrad Smith says school closings were first discussed in 1975.

SMITH: And that was because of two phenomena: one, the introduction of new facilities into the school system, and the declining school enrollment. I guess our school enrollment has dropped from about 160,000, 167,000 in 1967 or 68, to about 130,000 today. A loss of some 35,000 students. At the same time, about ten years ago, the city and the school system commenced a very ambitious schools construction program. And at that time, the idea was to replace existing facilities which were old and no longer useful for educational purposes.

SUGHRUE: Smith admits that one of the criteria for closing an old school is its proximity to a new one. And in a superintendent's report, dated May of this year, the timing of the recommended school closings is linked with the opening of nearby new schools. On the surface, it looks as if the closings were brought on by the need to fill those new buildings, but Smith denies that.

SMITH: Even if there was no change in the student enrollment, there will still be a need to construct newer, more adequate facilities for our students, as it's simply a crime to have a kid going to school at a building that's over 100 years old.

SUGHRUE: Do you think that the District built more schools than it needed in that program?

SMITH: I don't think so at all. I think we built less. I think we still have a need for a substantial number of new schools.

SUGHRUE: Smith also says the closings are a cost-cutting measure. The 13 schools shutdown so far have saved the D.C. schools nearly $700,000. But a colleague of Smith's on the school board, Betty Ann Kane, says the enrollment decline caught the school system by surprise. And it was too late then to turn around the building program.

KANE: There was over-planning and another thing I think that happened, is that a lot of housing that the Mayor had predicted--a lot of our population projections were based on promises by the Mayor and the city government, that they would be building housing --ant that housing has not been built. The corridors haven't been re-built, the new housing hasn't come. Fort Lincoln I think, is a perfect example. Fort Lincoln got so tied up in red tape. We had two elementary schools and a high school planned for the new town at Fort Lincoln, and luckily we've only built one, the elementary school, but that elementary school is almost finished and there's nobody there. There are 50 townhouses. Whether we'll ever open Fort Lincoln in the next five years, I don't know, but we're certainly not going to open it now. And looking at that neighborhood and looking at how Fort Lincoln is situated, we would probably have to close three or four elementary schools that are miles and miles apart to produce enough children to go to Fort Lincoln.

SUGHRUE: The Director of Planning for the D.C. schools, Jay Weldon Greene, says no new schools have been delayed in opening because of a lack of students, but some schools have been re-programmed. The Fort Lincoln school, for example, was to have opened this fall as an elementary, but will open eventually as a special education facility. And special ed students will be bused in from all parts of the city to fill the Fort Lincoln school. This fall, a new elementary and junior high will be put into operation. Planning Director Greene says the new school openings are causing problems of their own.

GREENE: Yes, there is a staffing problem, particularly with the custodial staff that we need to run the buildings. We do not have the funds to hire, and the positions even, for the new schools that we have. And that means that we need to close some of older buildings so that we can have adequate staff in the new buildings to keep them up.

SUGHRUE: Are there going to be underused schools in the district for many years to come?

GREENE: It seems as if there will be, not only on the elementary level, but eventually on junior high school level as well.

SUGHRUE: Do you blame any of this on the Building Program.

GREENE: No. No, we have not made any attempt to find any factors to blame it on at all, but we know that it deals with the decline in birth rate throughout the country. Some of our new facilities will be opening and they will be under-capacity. Some have already opened in fact and they are under-capacity. What's happening in Washington, D.C. is happening all over the country.

MERROW: That report was prepared for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION by Karen Sughrue of member station WAMU in Washington, D.C.

BLAIR: Not every school district is beset with the problem of declining enrollments. Families move to a new state or to a new part of the city, and

that causes problems for school districts. They need more space. In fact, even as the number of students continues to decline, as it will until 1983 or 84, nationally, we will have to spend $10 billion a year on new classroom space according to a new report.

MERROW: Again, that's primarily because we Americans move around so much. For example, nine states lost % of their students between 1970 and 1975. But five states gained more than 5%. Mesa, Arizona,is one school district with growing pains; and as any school administrator will tell you, those are the best pains of all.

MERROW: In one sense, Mesa has a distinct advantage: most school districts did their growing in the 1950's and 1960's and Mesa can benefit from their experience. Gordon Helm reports.

MESA, ARIZONA: A SCHOOL DISTRICT WITH INCREASING STUDENT ENROLLMENT

HELM: "Is bigger better?" Arizona has some interesting contrasts. In a state of little more than two million residents, more than one million of those live in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Mesa, a suburb of Phoenix is the third largest city in Arizona, and has the second largest school district. I spoke with Joannie Flatt, Community Relations Director of the Mesa Unified School District and asked her to describe the educational climate of Mesa.

FLATT: We have 27 neighborhood elementary schools, and each one of those attendance areas has different needs to serve the population there. So for instance in our building program, as I mentioned we are growing, half of our schools, of our 41 schools, were built in the last 10 or 15 years. And as we build our new schools, we build them so that they can serve various educational styles. We build our buildings with runners in the floor and ceiling so that we can either add or take away walls, depending on the needs of that particular community. To save building costs, we use the same plan, same architectural plan say four or five times with minor changes in it, and this saves us a great deal of money in architectural fees. And so, when we do this, one plan will suit several different neighborhoods. We are a growing district, and as such, we are constantly having to build schools. We're probably the most rapidly growing area in the state of Arizona, and you know how quickly Arizona is growing. Again, because of the growth, bond issues are a very big thing in Mesa. We hold the record for the state of Arizona. Four years ago we passed $28 million bond election. Prior to that, it was an $18 million election, and this next year we're going to have to go for anywhere between $25 and $32 million to keep up with the growth.

HELM: To the question "Is bigger better?" Joannie Flatt envisions a bigger Mesa school district.

FLATT: A larger Mesa will work, because we will plan for it. It takes good long-range planning. It takes good projection. It takes good research and evaluation of what you're doing right now in order to plan for a system that is growing by leaps and bounds, as ours is. I think that there are some advantages and some disadvantages when you're talking about sizes of school district. Districts,say,the size of Mesa has many advantages over a smaller district because we're able to consolidate more, we're able to offer more resources to our people. We're able to have resource people in the areas of math, reading, science, music, elementary physical education: people who are specialists in these fields. So there are some advantages of the larger school system. And whether "bigger is better?". I don't know, and I don't know how big would be too big. I would hate to try and manage the New York City schools, but I have a friend who does and they seem to be getting along.

BLAIR: That report was prepared for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION by Gordon Helm of member station KMCR in Phoenix, Arizona.

MERROW: But while they're "riding high" in Mesa and enjoying the growth, a surge in student enrollment can cause problems. It's doing just that in District 196. A small school district south of Minneapolis and St.Paul. Rich Deitman talked about the problems of growth there with School Superintendent John Bristol.

THE PROBLEMS IN MINNESOTA

DEITMAN: Bristol's district takes in all or parts of some of the state's fastest growing suburbs. It includes Rosemont, Lakeville, Apple Valley, and Eagon, all just south of the Twin Cities. So, it's no surprise the distict's enrollment is steadily growing while those around it decline. What is interesting are some of the problems and solutions coming out of this unique situation. One problem facing Bristol and the board is accommodating the growing number of students. Some suggest busing children to facilities in neighboring districts that have been vacated by falling enrollments. This they say is preferable to building new structures which might themselves end up unused ten years from now. Bristol disagrees. He argues that busing long distances is more expensive than building new schools. He also has his own ideas of how the district can avoid overbuilding and the consequent expensive, but empty shells, when enrollment falls off.

BRISTOL: Well, I think that if there were a strong indication that a school district is peaking in its enrollment, then one would surely have to take a look at that dimension and say are we talking about a short-term situation, and say on that basis what is the best idea. Actually what we have done, however, is we've hedged the issue of growth and overbuilding in that we right now build fewer elementary schools than the population would typically dictate. We built K-5 elementary schools, which means one full grade level is not even there. When declining enrollment does set in, we'll be able to move students from middle schools to elementary schools and generate the space then at the secondary level as that bulge of students comes through. Second thing we're doing is building schools that are in good locations and that are of a design that can be sold easily. So, I think that in summary what I'm saying is that unless there's strong evidence that it is less expensive to do something like this, this busing, surely the educational issue alone would mandate not doing it. And, as I understand the logic forwarded by many people why you ought to be busing students, is that it's cheaper. The hard facts are it isn't cheaper.

DEITMAN: Declining enrollment is also resulting in teacher layoffs. And, often, the first to go are the young, relatively inexperienced teachers with least seniority. Bristol says this surplus of young teachers and certain state laws cause him problems when trying to put together a well balanced staff.

BRISTOL: Well, actually, we do hire some younger teachers. We also hire experienced teachers. And one of the problems we face is that the legislation actually encourages us to hire young teachers who are on unrequested leave of absence from some other school district. Declining enrollment districts also need some of these young teachers, and for legislation as it now stands to be encouraging us to hire their youngest teacher, doesn't make sense. What we should have is some flexibility that would allow us some few more dollars so that we can hire more of the experienced teachers, and they could then maintain some of the younger staff which they need for their educational programs.

DEITMAN: Dr. John Bristol, Superintendent of suburban Minneapolis School District 196. I'm Rich Deitman.

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BLAIR: The state of Maine has growth problems of its own, because people are moving from country to city, or from city to suburbs. One school district in York County, Maine,has had an increase in student population of over a 100%

since 1969. And students there are going to school in churches and even in a re-modeled hen house, according to the Maine Teachers Association.

MERROW: Bill Legere reports.

SHIFTING POPULATION IN MAINE

LEGERE: In Maine, a shift in population from cities to rural areas and a two-year moratorium on new school construction has caused overcrowding in some schools and left others with empty classrooms. In Maine's major cities, classrooms sit empty, and in some cases entire school buildings have been closed, while in other parts of the state, students attend classes in hallways, gymnasiums and auditoriums. What causes this imbalance and why weren't the schools ready for it? It's a complicated problem, but the major reason is a steady shift in population in the state, coupled with in-migration from other parts of the country. Louis Ploch studies Maine's population patterns at the University of Maine. He explains the shift in population.

PLOCH: People in Maine, even though our cities aren't near as large as they are in the rest of the East Coast, are beginning to feel the pinch of urbanism, and they're still in the suburbanization movement which was popular 10, 15 years ago around the larger cities. So that some of the people from the larger cities in Maine, are moving out into the periphery of those cities, or are suburbanizing. So, this accounts for part of the population increase in some of the areas surrounding our larger cities and a large share of it is in-migrants.

LEGERE: But Ploch warns that the present trend could reverse itself. He says school planners should be prepared for a shift back to the cities.

PLOCH: Population prediction is probably about the most risky business going, so it's very difficult to say what's going to happen for sure. But on the basis of both the data that we have and observations that I've made in the last four or five years, I would say yes, I would think that rural schools probably will increase in population to some degree. But one of the interesting things we've noted is that some of the in-migrants who come to Maine, and as I said before, seek out the more rural areas, find as their kids come along, then they want to come a little closer to the larger areas. I can think of one particular town in Maine, north of Bangor, which was particularly attractive because of land prices and land availability to a relatively large number of out-of-staters. Now, some of these people are moving into the Orno-Old Town--Bangor area, precisely because of school availability -- in their terms at least -- at a little higher level.

LEGERE: The State Department of Education studied the shift in enrollments from urban schools to rural schools and found that while city school populations peaked in 1971 and have been declining since, enrollment in suburban and rural schools has been increasing, at a rate of 5% per year for ten years. So in Maine cities such as Portland, Bangor and Waterville, some classrooms are empty. The teaching force in Bangor was reduced by 30 teachers last year alone, and just a few weeks ago, the city of Waterville decided to close an elementary school building permanently.

Meanwhile, in some rural areas, classrooms are overcrowded. The problem has been compounded by a legislative moratorium on new school construction. By state law, the Department of Education must approve any school construction in the state, and officials there say that from August of 1975 until August of this year, only one new school building was approved; and that was to replace a building destroyed by fire. The moratorium on construction was lifted a few weeks ago and the department quickly approved eight urgent projects. But, construction won't begin for several months

and voters must approve the funds for the projects. That means over a two-year lag in school construction. That lag and the uncertainty over population changes, makes long-range planning extremely difficult. Right now, the state plans four or five years ahead. Experts agree that the state must plan further into the future than that if Maine is to meet the need for additional classrooms without overbuilding any more than it already has.

But so far, at least, school officials say the surplus classrooms aren't much of a problem. Some of the space was quickly filled by special education programs mandated by the legislature last year; and in many cases, the empty classrooms were in old, obsolete buildings which have been abandoned or demolished. Wendall Eton is Superintendent of Schools in Bangor, which has experienced an enrollment decline of 5% per year.

ETON: Yes, there are a few empty classrooms. Right at the present time, I think, for this fall, there will be three empty classrooms. Of course, they don't empty so fast as one might expect, because we add programs and that fills up some of our facilities. For instance, in special education, we have added several new special education programs. Special education programs accommodate only about eight to twelve youngsters per program, and generally use a full-size classroom for those eight to twelve. So, that takes up some classrooms. Also, we have resource rooms where we take some youngsters out of regular classrooms, work with them, and return them to the regular classroom. This takes up some of our classrooms.

LEGERE: Eton admits that he and other city officials were taken by surprise by the drop in school-age population.

ETON: I can remember just a few year ago, when I was quite taken with the fact by reading Barry Commoner, and Paul Erlich and these people that we were going to just multiply ourselves off the face of the earth, or so it seemed. So, we were taken quite by surprise. Our earlier projections indicated that we were going to continue to expand for quite some time, and that we were going to have quite a baby boom in the late '70's, early '80's. I guess that just isn't going to take place.

LEGERE: The problems in Maine show how far-ranging the effects of government programs can be. For example, one school official attributes some of the shift to the rural areas to the availability of low interest Farmers Home Administration loans for rural housing; and another says that the moratorium on school construction had its effect on the private sector too. School building represents almost 20% of the construction work in Maine.

For OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, this is Bill Legere in Bangor, Maine.

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BLAIR: It's not easy being a school superintendent, or a school board member. And, as more parents get involved in their childrens' schools--that's a good thing--the job of running the schools gets more complicated.

MERROW: We can't predict the future any better than anybody else, but there are some clear trends: the number of school-age children will continue to drop, at least until 1983 or 1984, and increases after that will be slight, unless we start having more children; the number of teachers will drop as well, but so will the average class size, because the student population is shrinking faster than the teacher population. It looks as if the number of administrators will remain stable or increase slightly.

BLAIR: The cost of education will continue to go up, because education

is labor-intensive, and because of energy costs, and because of expensive, new, federally mandated programs.

MERROW: But here's the irony: individual schools are getting bigger and bigger, because we're closing schools faster than we're losing students. In 1968, there were 94,000 schools. In 1973, there were 88,000. The average school in 1968 had 445 students. In 1973, the average school had 515 students. So schools are getting bigger, despite some evidence that "smaller is better" for everyone.

BLAIR: Here's what Roger Barker and Paul Gump wrote in their study, "Big School, Small School" back in 1964.

MERROW: "The educational process is a subtle and delicate one about which we know little, but surely it thrives on participation, enthusiasm and responsibility. What seems to happen is that as schools get larger, more of the students are less needed. They become superfluous, redundant. A school should be small enough so that it's students are not redundent."

BLAIR: But, school boards and city leaders have to worry about budgets as well, and "bigger" costs less. So the trend is to big schools, but with new things inside them, like mini-schools and alternative programs -- all designed to preserve the virtues of smallness inside a big school.

MERROW: Is that strategy working? We don't know. We hear though that those experimental programs are among the first to be cut as times get tougher.

BLAIR: So, "bigger" may not be better, but "small" is expensive, and "bigger" is supposedly cheaper, and that's better. Right?

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WOMAN: People buy their homes to send their children here, in the neighborhood school, that's why they buy homes out here.

SHER: If that feeling of neighborhood solidarity is eliminated, I think the kids suffer in that kind of setup. And I think that that process of bureaucratizing education is not one which is helpful to children in the least.

We'll continue to close schools this September, and we're stepping up our program of closing schools. We're being forced to do that by our financial crisis.

It's been traumatic for employees, for parents and for students. We get the large volume of letters expressing concern from all quarters every/day.

WOMAN: I don't think it's a very good idea. Well, some kids, they need the school really. The neighborhood, you know.

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MERROW: Reports for this program came from: Jay Baltezore in San Francisco; Karen Sughrue, station WAMU, Washington, D.C.; Karen James and Deborah Hamilton, WUHY, Philadelphia; Bill Legere, WMEH, Orno, Maine;

Gordon Helm, KMCR, Phoenix, Arizona; Richard Deitman, KSJN, St. Paul, Minnesota; John Bisney, KBIA, Columbia, Missouri; and David Selvin in Washington, D.C.

If you missed Part I of this series on declining enrollment and school closing, you might want the transcript of both programs. You can get them by sending $1.00 to National Public Radio -- Education, Washington, D.C., 20036. Please ask for Programs No. 89 and 90, and also, tell us the call letters of your NPR station.

BLAIR: Two cassettes of the program are also available for $10.00, and we have a program guide which lists our schedule for the rest of the year. That's free for the asking.

MERROW: Our address again, National Public Radio -- Education, Washington D.C., 20036. Ask for Programs No. 89 and 90, and tell us the call letters of your NPR station.

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BLAIR: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is written and produced by Jo Ellyn Rackleff and John Merrow. The Assistant Producer is Katharine Ferguson. Technical assistance by Ralph Woods.

I'm Wendy Blair.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR, National Public Radio